

# Contention 1 Drone Strikes: Impact of United States Drone Strikes on Terrorist Organization Activity

**SURG** | Social Science and Journalism (SSJ) | *Tags: Quantitative Analysis*

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



| Proposal Strengths   | Areas for Improvement   |
|--|---|
| The background section goes beyond a summary of past literature by focusing on exposing a gap in knowledge and justifying why it should be filled.   | While many methods are justified explicitly, certain methodological decisions, such as the temporal constraints of the terrorist attack data, are not justified. It is important to justify specifically the decisions you make in managing/manipulating your data. |
| As a data heavy project, this proposal does a great job of breaking down 1) where the data is coming from 2) how the data will be managed/what data will be selected and 3) how the data will be analyzed. | The section heading are not necessary. We encourage you to instead situate your reader with a topic sentence instead.   |
| The proposal addresses possible limitations and shows how they will be accounted for in the final product.   |   |
| There is a clear output identified, and that output is connected back explicitly to the research question.   |   |



| Other Key Features to Take Note Of  |
|---|
| When working with data, you should never assume you will have access to everything you need. It is important to get confirmation before proposing your project that you will be able to get the data you intend to use. In the proposal, you should explain how you went through that process of securing data, and we encourage you to include proof of contact/access in an appendix if applicable. |

Section headings are not necessary

The Question: As more governments fight terrorist organizations, the question of whether particular strategies or tactics dampen terrorist lethality or in fact incite more terrorist attacks has become increasingly salient. For the United States, drone strikes have become one of the most prominent methods for attacking important individuals in efforts to limit the capabilities of terrorist organizations (Landler and Cooper). My project seeks to answer this question: does the use of drone strikes as a counter-terrorism strategy decrease the capabilities (and therefore threats) of terrorist organizations? As the Trump administration continues to ramp up the use of drone strikes and give more autonomy to its military commanders, understanding the effectiveness of drone strikes as a counter-terrorist tool is becoming increasingly important (Savage and Schmitt).

Clear research/project statement occurs in 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph

The Justification: We have limited knowledge about the impact of drone strikes in combating terrorist organizations. Most studies focus on small regions, overbroad analysis, or policies unrelated to the United States. The main analysis of American drone strikes focuses on the FATA region of Pakistan, which is only a geographically small portion of the American drone operation (Johnston and Sarbahi). Thus, more information about the United States' drone program in its entirety is needed to fully understand drone strikes' effect on terrorist organizations. Another analysis attempts to analyze the effects of the totality of United States targeted killings (Morehouse). Unfortunately, looking at methods of targeted killings other than drone strikes can dilute the unique effects drone strikes may have on conflict; literature on the issue highlights that drone strike campaigns may force terrorist organizations into hiding due to fear of constant surveillance (Williams). Another study attempted to evaluate strikes conducted by the Israeli military yet doing so misses the American influence on the battlespace (Byman). My work will address drone strikes in a new way: new information from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen will allow me to look specifically at the United States' drone program in its entirety. My project will seek to analyze whether drone strikes have any effect on the number of attacks a terrorist organization commits and the lethality of those attacks. Under the Trump administration, the legal threshold for a "go" order on a strike is significantly lower; the military is no longer required to show that a target poses an imminent threat to Americans (Savage and Schmitt). If the changes made by the Trump administration cause drone strikes to attack unimportant or unverified targets, then the response of terrorist organizations could differ from those seen in analyses of prior drone strikes. This preliminary analysis of limited Trump administration data will provide insights that can direct future research.

Background leads to specific goals of 8-week project

Identifies gap in knowledge and justifies why gap should be filled.

The Method: I will create my own dataset. Instances of drone strikes can be found in a database curated by New America Foundation, which tracks United States drone strikes overseas (Bergen, Sternman and Sims). To compile the number of attacks conducted by terrorist organizations, I will use data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Information is collected in this separate database from a variety of media sources, and the information is not added into the database until professional curators deem the information credible (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)). The GTD lists over 170,000 instances of terrorist activity, so I will compile all the attacks in the weeks when the drone programs were active. When analyzing the Trump administration's drone policy, the data on drone strikes will only include attacks in Yemen and Somalia because the Trump administration has not yet applied the new policy in Afghanistan or Pakistan (Savage and Schmitt). Furthermore, the GTD is updated annually and has not yet received data with attacks from 2017, so I will use data compiled by PeaceTech Labs to supplement the GTD with data on terrorist attacks from 2017. I will use the ArcGIS, a computer mapping system to match each

Need justification for choosing specific parameters for data.

Good detail on where the data will be found.

Good detail on how the data will be handled.

drone strike and its related terrorist attacks. The NAF and GTD databases both have the longitude and latitude of drone strikes and terrorist attacks, so I can map the data for analysis (Bergen, Sternman and Sims) (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)). Because drone strikes only affect a small and specific geographic region, this tool will help me ensure that I am analyzing terrorist attacks that are geographically pertinent to a drone strike. This step is taken, for instance, because I do not want to analyze the effect that drone strikes in the FATA region of Pakistan have on terrorist attacks in Yemen. Past literature has analyzed the effect of drone strikes on terrorist activity within a 75km radius of the strike, and I will follow that trend (Johnston and Sarbahi). ArcGIS will allow me to easily export the paired datasets for analysis. Additionally, I will include control variables in my dataset to isolate confounders that may influence my results. Confounding variables improperly alter the results of a statistical analysis because they cause both the dependent and independent variable. For example, I will control for the size of a terrorist organization and whether the organization has an ally because these factors affect the likelihood of a drone strike and the likelihood of a terrorist incident occurring. These will be two of many controls I will include in the analysis. This work will likely take four to five weeks of the summer.

Limitations of methods addressed, explained with evidence, and work-arounds proposed

After I compile the dataset, I will use the statistics software R to run a regression to test the relationship between the independent variable, drone strikes, and the dependent variables, the number of attacks a terrorist organization commits and the lethality of those attacks. This regression will include multiple control variables, such as the two mentioned above, to help ensure the regression supplies the most accurate results. The coding in R and the creation of the proper regression code will take about one to two weeks to properly execute. R will provide a table of results that I will then use to interpret the outcomes of the regression and, hopefully, understand how the data answers my question. The table provided by R will identify whether drone strikes are associated with a decrease or increase in the number of attacks by terrorist organizations and the lethality of those attacks. The table will also show the statistical significance, the likelihood that the result was a product of chance. The final report will explain the results produced by the analysis and interpret what they mean in terms of the effectiveness of drone strikes. For example, if the regression shows that there is a negative relationship between drone strikes and the amount of terrorist attacks in comparison to the average amount of drone strikes in a given week, then the results would indicate that drone strikes are potentially an effective counter-terrorist tool because they decrease the amount of terrorist activity. The coding in R and the construction of this final report will take the final two to three weeks.

Good to mention specific course numbers

My experience from Political Science 312 (Research Methods in Political Science) has taught me to how use R and how to properly construct a dataset for statistical analysis. The quarter-long project that we conducted is very similar in design to the project I am proposing today and has given me experience to execute this project. As this statistical project builds on and goes beyond my background in R and in statistics, I will work with my faculty advisor, Professor Reno, and the library's GIS support system to assure that I successfully implement complex models. Prof. Reno has significant research experience and a strong understanding of counter-terrorism strategy, and Northwestern's GIS librarians have been invaluable in helping me prepare this project and proposal. Ultimately, this is an issue I have been extremely invested and interested in since my freshman year of high school. Given my current coursework trajectory, I plan to write a senior thesis, and this project will serve as the start of an analysis on the broader effects of drone strikes on conflict, including an analysis on drone strikes' effect on terrorist recruitment, United States war victory, and other factors.

Methods are defined and justified.

Timeline is useful

Specific description of the analysis process

Excellent explicit description of the outputs and how the output will be interpreted in the context of the research aims

Works Cited

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